topic Magazine

April 2019

Finding Jesus on the Front Yard

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SISTER GERTRUDE MORGAN always believed she would be the bride of Christ. In 1965, after moving to New Orleans and taking up work as a missionary and a street preacher, the Lafayette, Alabama, native began wearing all white to signify her spiritual marriage to him. The spirit moved her in other ways as well, and she started painting scenes of the Second Coming of Christ using any surface available to her: cardboard, plastic utensils, picture frames, lampshades. “Through his Blessed hands as he take my hand and write...I just do the Blessed work,” she told an interviewer.

Sister Gertrude Morgan stands on her porch in Lower Ninth Ward, 1974. Photograph by Guy Mendes. Courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.

Work made by self-taught artists like Gertrude Morgan has been lumped together under many names over the years—outsider art, primitive art, yard art, folk art, and even junk art—and it became popular among collectors in the 1970s and ’80s after it was featured in places like the Museum of American Folk Art and the New York Outsider Art Fair.

In a new book, *Walks to the Paradise Garden*, edited by Phillip March Jones, author Jonathan Williams and photographers Roger Manley and Guy Mendes gather interviews and encounters with artists they met along their road trips through the American South in the 1980s. Some of the artists they spoke with, like Sister Gertrude Morgan, would eventually be discovered by the art-world establishment, while others they met—like former mechanic Vernon Lee Burwell—continued to labor in obscurity.

Along with a deep sense of religious wonder, there is a sense of urgency to the work featured in Walks to the Paradise Garden, a compulsion to make more and more of it until it covered the walls of their homes, crowded the hallways, and spilled onto the front lawn. As Williams writes in the introduction to the book, “We’re talking about a South that is both celestial and chthonian,” pertaining to both heaven and hell. “They are often one and the same.”

Leroy Almon (1938–1997)
Tallapoosa, Georgia

Leroy Almon on his front stoop in Tallapoosa, Georgia, 1987. Like his woodworking mentor, Elijah Pierce, Almon became an ordained minister and nondenominational evangelist. Photograph by Roger Manley. Courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.

BORN IN TALLAPOOSA, GEORGIA, Leroy Almon spent most of his adult life in Columbus, Ohio, working as a shoe salesman and marketing manager for Coca-Cola. In Columbus, he apprenticed under 88-year-old wood carver Elijah Pierce, who also worked as a barber and preacher. After mastering the craft in the early 1980s, Almon returned to Tallapoosa, where he spent his free time carving earthly temptations and battles with the Devil into pine, cedar, redwood, and basswood. In *Walks to the Paradise Garden*, Jonathan Williams writes about a carving he bought from Almon titled "Taking It Easy." "Every time I look at it, I am reminded of Duccio, or Sassetta, or Domenico Veneziano"—early Renaissance painters whose work featured religious tableaux of figures in profile. The Smithsonian acquired a 1990 painting from Almon titled Hell, which the museum included in its 1999 exhibition *Contemporary Folk Art: Treasures from the Smithsonian American Art Museum*.

Leroy Almon, *Hell*, 1990, enamel on carved redwood with nails. Courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Leroy Almon, *Mr. & Mrs. Satan Fishing*, 1991. Courtesy of Gordon Gallery.

Annie Hooper (1897–1986)
Buxton, North Carolina

Annie Hooper in her house in Buxton, North Carolina, 1982. Photograph by Roger Manley. Courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.

THE DAUGHTER OF A CIVIL WAR VETERAN, Annie Hooper didn't start sculpting until she hit her 50s, after spending several months in a mental-health facility in Raleigh, North Carolina, for depression. It was there that she connected the pain of her longtime illness with the agonies of ancient saints. For the next 40 years until her death in 1986, Hooper sculpted nearly 5,000 biblical figures, grouping the figures together in an estimated 300 tableaux around her house in the remote village of Buxton, in the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

In 1970, when Roger Manley was a freshman at Davidson University, he visited Hooper's house on a lark while hitchhiking through the Outer Banks. He describes the chaotic scene at her home in *Walks to the Paradise Garden*. "Hundreds of Hebrews followed Moses and the Pillar of Fire to the Promised Land in what had once been the sun porch, while the dancers and musicians at Belshazzar's Feast revelled beneath the Handwriting on the Wall in an upstairs bedroom," he writes. Hooper told Manley, "I feel like I've been dedicated and set apart for God's work. I can only live in hope, fully believing that God will bless me by making me a blessing to others, and I think I have been." After Hooper's death, Manley supported the preservation of her work, and thousands of her figures are now housed in the North Carolina State University's Gregg Museum of Art and Design.

Annie Hooper with wooden "serpents," c. 1984. Photograph by Roger Manley. Courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.

A close-up of Annie Hooper's figurines. The sculptures underwent cleaning and repairs in 2018. Photograph by Lisa Boykin Batts/*The Wilson Times*.

Eddie Owens Martin, a.k.a. St. EOM (1908–1986)
Buena Vista, Georgia

ST. EOM WAS BORN EDDIE OWENS MARTIN in Marion County, Georgia, to a family of white sharecroppers. After running away to New York City at 14 to escape his abusive father, he worked as a drug dealer and fortune teller in Harlem, where he had a prophetic vision during an illness that would lead to the adoption of a new religion: "I came to a monstrous man who sat in a chair, as big as five men. His hair went straight up and his beard was parted in the middle. He told me I would become the Pasaquoyan, the originator of a new way of life."

In 1957, after another spirit visited Martin, who now went by the name St. EOM, the 49-year-old returned to Marion County and began building the Land of Pasaquan, a temple complex on his four-acre property that he would spend three decades filling with shrines, pagodas, and dance floors, paying for it with the $20 bills he received while fortune telling. After his death in 1986, a group of supporters called the Pasaquan Preservation Society continued to care for the structures. Today the complex includes 900 feet of murals—a mix of Pre-Columbian, African, and Native American motifs—and is under the stewardship of Columbus State University, which hosts events and talks at the site. In 2008, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

St. EOM in the Pasaquan Inner Sanctum, 1982. Photograph by Guy Mendes. Courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.

The back gate of the Land of Pasaquan, near Buena Vista, Georgia, 1984. Photograph by Guy Mendes. Courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.

St. EOM and his dog Boo at the front gate to the Land of Pasaquan, 1982. Photograph by Guy Mendes. Courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.

The front gate at the Land of Pasaquan, 1984. Photograph by Guy Mendes. Courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.

Vernon Lee Burwell (1916–1990)
Rocky Mount, North Carolina

IN A SMALL GRASSY YARD in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, stands a group of sculptures: Martin Luther King Jr. riding a horse, Jesus holding the Lamb of God, Abraham Lincoln, and Sojourner Truth. Born into a sharecropping family, Vernon Lee Burwell, who is also a deacon of his local church, spent 33 years of his life working as a mechanic, welding sheet metal for the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, which stretched from Florida to Washington, D.C. After retiring from the railroad in 1976, he started sculpting large-scale figures out of cement, placing them in his front yard.

Vernon Burwell stands in front of his house in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, 1988. Photograph by Roger Manley. Courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.

In his interview with Jonathan Williams, Burwell is modest about his art. ("Rocky Mount don't know too much of what I'm about.") He explains his choice to start his sculpture practice with an image of Martin Luther King Jr.: "Well, he was a public figure. It was a great excitement to the people here in the neighborhood. I had Dr. King out there on the corner of my lot in a blue suit of clothes and a necktie. People would stop to look—I thought to myself, *Somebody is going to have an accident.*" Burwell's pieces have been purchased by patrons like Robert Lynch—one of the rare black collectors of outsider art—whose collection was sold to North Carolina Wesleyan College in Rocky Mount in 1987.

When asked by Williams why he started sculpting and what the source was for his inspiration, Burwell answers simply, "I just decided I would try to make something."

Abraham Lincoln sculpture in Vernon Burwell's yard, 1985. Photograph by Roger Manley. Courtesy of Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

Statue of Sojourner Truth, 1987. Photograph by Roger Manley. Courtesy of Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900–1980)
New Orleans, Louisiana

SISTER GERTRUDE MORGAN began her adult life as a street preacher in Columbus, Georgia, before moving to New Orleans in 1939, where she built a mission, an orphanage, a chapel, and a child-care center. In 1956, she began wearing all white—a white dress, white cap, white stockings and shoes—anticipating she would become "God's wife" and "nurse to Doctor Jesus." Sister Gertrude explained that God had told her that she needed to paint in order to spread the good news—her primary subject matter was inspired by the Book of Revelation, which tells the story of the Second Coming of Christ. "I am a missionary of Christ before I'm an artist. Give all the fame to some other artist," Sister Gertrude told *Interview* magazine in 1973, the year after her work was featured in an exhibition at the American Folk Art Museum. "I work for the Lord. Now don't forget to give Him credit."

Sister Gertrude Morgan in her Everlasting Gospel Revelation Mission, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1974. Photograph by Guy Mendes. Courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.

Jesus is my Airplane, c. 1970. Tempera, ballpoint pen and ink, and pencil on paper. Courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum.

New Jerusalem, c. 1974. Gouache and pencil on paperboard. Courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Jesus is My Airplane, 1974. Tempera and ballpoint pen on paperboard. Collection of Guy Mendes. Courtesy of Institute 193.